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ABSTRACT

Language attrition research usually attempts to elicit all types of usage from speakers of all fluency levels in a dying language in order to abstract changing linguistic patterns from situational variation. Informants adept at hiding their vernacular and improvising in an obsolescing variety are reluctant to admit to such scrutiny. In a linguistic study reported here, the isleno community asked researchers to act as archivists for a dialect revitalization movement. The few hundred remaining semi-speakers and bilinguals of "isleno" Spanish in Saint Bernard Parish (Louisiana) wanted the "best" Spanish to be recorded: the most formal register used by the last performers of oral narratives. The solution reached by community members and researchers was to have audiotapes of "typical" speech (everyday conversational style) used for less fluent members to reduce immediate identification and judgment. Both styles of speech, formal and informal, which contains hallmarks of language death such as loan phonology, simplified verb morphology, and English-like syntax, will be used to support the revitalization effort. Contains 29 references. (Author/MSE)

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PRESERVING "THE BEST" AND "TYPICAL" *ISLEÑO* SPANISH

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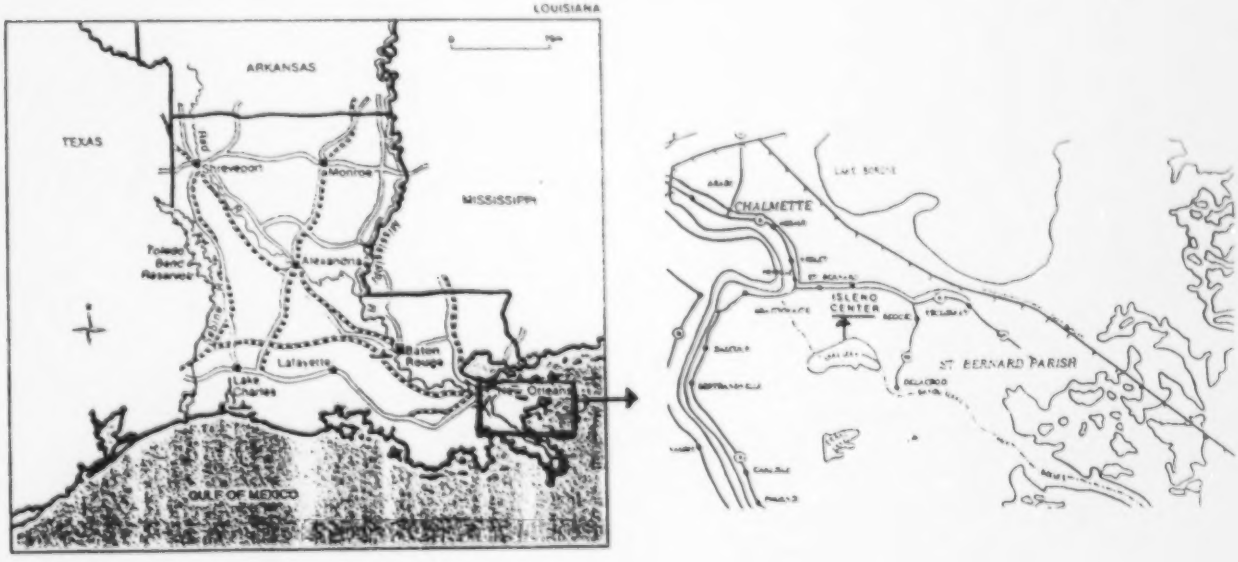
ABSTRACT

Language attrition research normally attempts to elicit all types of usage from speakers of all fluency levels in a dying language in order to abstract changing linguistic patterns from situational variation (Labov 1972). Informants adept at hiding their vernacular and improvising in an obsolescing variety are reluctant to submit to such scrutiny. The few hundred remaining semi-speakers and bilinguals of *isleño* Spanish in Louisiana want "the best" Spanish to be recorded—the most formal register used by the last performers of oral narratives. The *isleño* community reassured participants by proposing that audiotapes of "typical" speech (i.e., everyday conversational style) be used for less fluent members to reduce immediate identification and judgment. Both styles of speech (formal and informal, which contains hallmarks of language death (Dorian 1981) such as loan phonology, simplified verbal morphology, and English-like syntax) will be used as a testament to the origins of the revitalization movement of *isleño* Spanish.

The *isleño* dialect of Spanish is a dying language spoken by a few hundred elderly residents of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana (Lipski 1990). The map on your handout shows the location of their ancestral homesites in Louisiana. In 1778 the Spanish government had intended the recruits from the Canary Islands (hence, *isleños* 'islanders') to be a buffer between the French resistance based in New Orleans and the British holdings in the east (Fortier 1894). However, Gibson (1966) states that Spanish physical and human resources were inadequate to maintain a sufficient level of support against these forces,

MAP. *ISLEÑOS* IN LOUISIANA



Adapted from *Maps on File*. 1981. New York: Martin Greenwald Associates, Inc.
The *Isleño* Museum is located on Louisiana Highway 46, 1.5 miles east of Poydras, 7 miles south of Chalmette. Open daily 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. except Christmas, New Year's, and Mardi Gras Day.

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and the *isleños* retreated to the southeastern marshlands to form a dense and multiplex social network which reinforced the use of the nonstandard *isleño* dialect of Spanish through sheer isolation and unity of the group.

In the twentieth century, the *isleño* community has suffered "linguistic swamping" (a term from Fishman et al. 1985) from American English, due to mandatory public education, military service, and economic interaction with mainstream American culture. However, the oral tradition of the *isleño* dialect remains, due to the fact that the primary occupations of trapping and fishing kept *isleño* speakers "largely removed for long periods of time from English-speaking people" (MacCurdy 1950: 24). Present-day *isleños* live all through southeastern Louisiana, with the traditional cluster in Delacroix Island ("island" here refers to raised land surrounded by marshes, so that the group's name *isleño* has both a historical and a current meaning). Both men and women work and associate with non-*isleños* in American society, and use English almost exclusively. The younger members have assimilated well into American life. Few *isleños* are literate in Spanish, although some have taken classes in standard Spanish in high school and college.

The resulting language attrition has left few speakers under age 40 productively fluent in the *isleño* dialect. Lipski (1990) states that of the 1,000 to 2,000 *isleño* community members, less than 500 have any knowledge of Spanish at all; all fluent speakers are over the age of 60. Several notable linguistic features of language death are found in *isleño* Spanish, such as increasing loan phonology from American English, and other parallels to Caribbean Spanish, as in

/s/ aspiration and deletion:	/eh.paˈɲol/	*español*	'Spanish'
/ɾ/ deletion:	/seˈvi /	*servir*	'to serve'
/ð/ deletion:	/aˈbla.o/	*hablado*	'spoken'
English loan phoneme /š/:	/eh.maˈ ša/	*esmashar*	'to crash'

as well as changes in verbal morphology,

regularizing verbal paradigm:	*yo volo*		'I fly'
	compriende		'He/she understands'
archaisms:	*naide*		'nobody'
	ansina		'thus'
loanwords:	*garsolé*	< LaFr *garde-soleil*	'bonnet'
	treila	< Eng trailer	'trailer'

and increasingly English-like syntax, such as

high frequency pronoun use:	*yo tengo una canción muy importante cubana, y yo tengo una canción mexicana, pero yo soy español.* 'I have a very important Cuban song, and I have a Mexican song, but I am Spanish.'
increasing English-like structures:	*yo quiero a ellos ver* 'I want them to see.'
	Hablamos de pescando 'We're talking about fishing.'
code-mixing:	He's a good fisherman, too, for fish. Fishes everything. *Pescador de todo y coge todo, pero es difícil vender los peces ahora. Es difícil...* Not a good living anymore...

The future of the *isleño* community is not as endangered as its language, however. Language attitudes towards the *isleño* dialect of Spanish are improving so that in southeast Louisiana the remaining speakers (passive bilingual through Spanish dominant; no monolingual *isleño* Spanish speakers remain) want to preserve and revitalize their obsolescing language. The *Isleño* Museum in Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, and the Los Islenos [sic] Cultural and Heritage Society, an organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of *isleño* ethnic identity, are two indications that the modern-day *isleños* are working to preserve their ancestral folkways and life patterns. The *Isleño* Museum is the center of ethnic-revival activities, led by a core of active adult "semi-speakers" (Dorian 1977) and passive bilinguals who hope is that, as Hamp (1978) says, cultivating and valuing localism in the *isleño* community will foster language maintenance. However, linguists working in the community have had to address the concern that only "the best" *isleño* Spanish be recorded rather than the most typical speech, which includes the aforementioned features of language attrition. The so-called "best" Spanish is the most formal register used in the performance of *décima* folksongs and historical narratives.

"THE BEST" *ISLEÑO* SPANISH
La recién casada
(sung by Chelito Campo; transcribed by Felice Coles)

Ahora esta canción que vine ahora es de una recien casada...y así empieza
('Now this song that I'm coming to now is of a recently married woman...and so it begins')

—Yo soy la recien casada	I am a recently married woman
Y de mí naide esta guzará	Whom nobody will enjoy
Mi marido está en la guerra	My husband is at war
Por servir su libertad.	Serving liberty.
—Señora, si usted quisiera	Ma'am, if you would like
Dame una seña de su marido	To give me a sign of your husband
—Mi marido es alto, rubio	—My husband is tall, blond
Y nada tiene de cortés	And knows nothing of courtesy
Y en puño de su espada	And the point of his sword
Lleva un letrero francé	Carries a French sign.

This speaker employs a performance style (further examined in Coles 1991) in which the lexicon is literary (such as *puño* 'poignard of a sword'), the morphology is complex (as in *quisiera*, the imperfect subjunctive of *querer* 'to want'), and requires some degree of proficiency to perform meaningfully. The formal register used by this person is unavailable to most *isleño* community members, since they have few native speakers from which to learn these traditional songs and stories, a phenomenon known as "monostylism" (from Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977). However, several *isleños* consider themselves balanced bilinguals without possessing this performance style. Jaspaert, Kroon, and van Hout (1986: 43) state, "Full competence simply cannot be defined in an absolute sense, without taking into account the sociological, geographical, and historical position each user is in." Thus, communicative tasks in *isleño* Spanish are a matter of individual willingness more than assigned oral proficiency. Although a summer class was designed to increase fluency in adults and show children the value of their ethnic mother tongue, most participants still report their reluctance to use *isleño* Spanish in spontaneous conversations. Even bilinguals who possess some conversational adequacy (called "nonfull speakers" in Menn 1989) realize that their dialect is nonstandard and stigmatized when compared to the dialects of Spanish learned in the classroom. In contrast, in the same region of southeast Louisiana, Brown (1993) notes that near-passive Louisiana French speakers "activate" their competence by taking classes in standard (Parisian) French and then return to their grandparents for pronunciation practice and vocabulary building. The *isleños* thus far have not reacted positively to this type of practice in language preservation, noting instead the discrepancy between *isleño* Spanish and formal written Spanish. Hill (1978) reports this same problem for Cupeño and Luiseño: nearly all modern speakers would fall toward the "illiterate" end of the continuum, in spite of the fact that some are highly regarded as traditionalists. Whatever the *isleño* community perceives as "fluency," many *isleños* do not consider themselves to be competent subjects for investigations into the linguistic components of the language. Here is an excerpt from a conversationally adequate nonfull adult speaker.

"TYPICAL" *ISLEÑO* SPANISH

FC: *¿Qué es lo más importante en la vida de los isleños?*
('What's most important in the life of the *isleños*?')

WA: Uh, *¿aquí abajo?...Aquí abajo es la la pesca. Es como como viven todo esta gente viven de la pesca. Es como es como como se hace la vida.*
('Uh, down here? Down here it's fishing. It's like all these people live for fishing. It's how they make their living.')

FC: Mhm

WA: *Porque eh si no puede hacer con esto. Ellos no tienen escuela para di acá un trabajo ya seguirlo. Porque ellos no se ocupan de escuela. Esto se quieren es pescar. Es como isleños les gusta pescar. Porque yo calculo que...yo no sé lo lo que es . pero . la sangre, está en la sangre uno de pescar y eso. ¿Está bueno? es como vivir. ¿Compriende?*

('Because uh if they can't make it with this. They don't have enough schooling to go find a job there. Because they aren't occupied with school. What they want is to fish. It's like *isleños* like to fish. Because I reckon that...I don't know what it is . but . the blood, it's in the blood, fishing and that stuff. All right? It's life. Understand?')

This speech is informal, with calques from American English (*es como* 'it's like'), regularized verbal morphology (*compriende* is regularized by analogy with *entiende*), and creative syntactic structures (*Está en la sangre uno de pescar y eso* 'it's in the blood, one of fishing and that'). This speaker is able to participate in informal conversations to discuss everyday events and concepts but in the larger group does not produce performance level registers.

Part of the problem of obtaining all speech styles is that the value of *isleño* Spanish is still strictly symbolic. Younger *isleño* Spanish learners have not implemented the language into more than one sociofunctional domain; it remains a classroom objective rather than a communicative tool. In a similar situation, Jaffee (1993: 105) writes about Corsican that "it is easy to understand how many students had an uneasy relationship with their language as a practice and as a cultural symbol, caught as they were between an ideal of linguistic competence they did not meet and an uncertain new image of cultural/linguistic authenticity whose contours were not yet clear to them." The notion of correctness vs. error has never been standardized in *isleño* Spanish in order to transmit the "purest" form of the language. "Pure" in this case refers to what Thomas (1991: 275) calls "archaising purism": "reverence for the past, ... an exaggerated respect for past models, an excessive conservatism towards innovations or a recognition of the importance of literary tradition." Thus, many *isleños* feel comfortable talking about the language, but have a difficult time talking in the language. Fieldwork generally proceeds in English in most interviews for this reason.

Moerman (1988) highlights the value of real-life, real-time conversational events. Fieldworkers researching language attrition usually attempt in interviews to elicit all levels of usage (Labov 1972) in order to abstract changing linguistic patterns from situational variation. Language death studies usually gather several types of speech for analysis: Schmidt (1985) collected several registers of Australian Dyirbal: performances of story-telling texts, less formal retellings of traditional narratives, and informal conversations in order to document "the breakdown in the Dyirbal communication network" as part of its language attrition; Dorian (1981) used both formal interviews and informal conversation in researching

Southerland Gaelic; and Huffines (1989) interviewed Pennsylvanian German speakers in free conversation, while translating English sentences, and describing pictures. In a highly structured investigation, De Bot, Gommans, and Rossing (1991) administered two formal proficiency tests (cloze and Foreign Service Institute) and an informal interview to Dutch immigrants in France in order to disguise the collection of language attrition data. However, since language is the collective property of its speakers (Cojí Cuxil 1990), informants may wish to include or exclude from consideration language they feel is inappropriate, potentially embarassing, or somehow "not right." As Jackson (1987: 54) states, "Someone who is willing to talk to you wants to get it right." Most *isleños* hesitate to use their nonstandard dialect outside their close-knit social network and semispeakers are reluctant to be caught on tape speaking imperfectly. Many nonfluent speakers recognize their lack of control over a range of speech styles and are consequently unable to vary their manner of speaking in a way that is appropriate for formal interviews as opposed to informal gatherings (Segalowitz and Gatbonton 1977). Erickson and Shultz (1982) say that differences in communicative competence between interactional partners should be considered in the context of both small-scale and large-scale political relations. Semispeaker *isleños* always defer to more fluent members when *isleño* Spanish is spoken, and fluent members are presented as the "ambassadors" of the *isleño* community to the outside world. In group interviews, then, all members participate freely in American English but only the fluent members are heard using *isleño* Spanish. Although fieldworkers reiterate that the purpose of tape recording all types of speech events is to work with language samples to understand its social uses (Milroy 1987), informants adept at both hiding their vernacular from outsiders and improvising in an obsolescing variety are reluctant to submit their language to such scrutiny. Who will hear and judge the tapes? Many informants have a sense of some audience beyond that microphone, states Jackson (1987) and therefore wish to speak in only the clearest, most correct language that they know. Disguising the interview as an information gathering process may lessen the Observer's Paradox, but as England (1992) notes, an unfortunate result of the interview process may be that the speech community dislikes the "less than perfect" examples elicited from unguarded or unaware speakers.

One solution proposed by the *isleño* community is to have the researchers function as "archivists" for its revitalization movement: data collection is seen as documenting the first steps towards utilizing and widening *isleño* Spanish language use. The notion of archiving speech has both advantages and disadvantages, however. The advantage is that researchers are able to participate fully in recording formal group meetings and informal gatherings, although Jackson (1987) cautions that in field recordings the

researcher should not be a conversational participant, and the group perceives the scholar to be an impartial collector of materials, equally interested in both core and peripheral members of the social network. Audiotape recording has been the primary method of data collection in the *isleño* community, although the *Isleño* Museum maintains a protected set of videotaped performances, such as *décima* singing and story-telling sessions. ("Protected" to the *isleños* means not only from the ravages of time but also from idle curiosity.) Jackson (1987) states that the recorder has people talking to it as much as the interviewer, but that may make them more likely to perform rather than to report, which can be to the folklorists' advantage but to the participants' disadvantage. Ives (1980: 80) uses videotape as a means of avoiding the Observers Paradox. He says, "People are far more used to being photographed than being recorded. I've found video sometimes less intrusive than tape." The choice of audio or video tape is not usually one of the community's stipulation, however. Milroy (1987) states that we can broaden our own data base successfully only by discovering how different groups respond to our information-seeking activities. In this situation, the community has worked out for itself that audiotapes are for informal conversations and that videotapes are for staged performances. The speech data that is elicited in both situations is valuable for the *Isleño* Museum archives.

One disadvantage of archiving speech mentioned in Webb et al. (1966) is that archives deposit selected materials and that the survival of only part of a community's speech pattern may inhibit future investigations. The criteria for selecting archival materials may be left to the researcher, but in the *isleño* community the lead group of politically active "cultural gatekeepers" (a term from Erickson and Shultz 1982) suggest that audiotapes be used for recording informal speech so that the receptively dominant members are not immediately recognized and judged "while they're trying to talk." The concern for negative judgment and evaluation leads them to try to shield nonfluent speakers who use their own stigmatized variety.

Thus far, *isleño* interviewees have professed to be pleased at being asked to discuss their language, culture, and identity regardless of their fluency levels, and have participated eagerly upon learning that these tapes will be part of the archives at the *Isleño* Museum, a renovated family cottage run by the National Park Service. *Isleños* have called language death research from these tapes a "a good way to show our kids what it was like for us, and where we need to go with our dialect." The key here is education of the cultural gatekeepers that all levels of speech are necessary to preservation efforts. In this

way, recorded *isleño* speech can be used in language preservation efforts by the community and for linguistic investigations by researchers.

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